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ABSTRACT

Many successful career women fail to reach their full potential because of the imposter phenomenon, an inability to experience themselves as successful career persons. Career women were studied to investigate variables which may be used to predict the imposter phenomenon and also to test the hypothesis that successful career women who are able to attribute their successes to internal factors, e.g., ability, may suffer less from the effects of the imposter phenomenon. Successful women (N=80) in traditionally masculine careers completed questionnaires containing five scales (perception of self, acceptance of self, perception of career success, tolerance for ambiguity, and perception of parental career orientation) and demographic questions. Results showed that discrepancies between self-perceptions of the ideal person in one's field, retrospective perceptions of parental career orientation, and attributions of causality for career success contributed significantly to the prediction of the imposter phenomenon. The findings suggest that successful career women who suffer from the phenomenon have not identified and internalized those aspects of themselves that have been responsible for their career achievements. (PAS)

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THE IMPOSTOR PHENOMENON IN SUCCESSFUL CAREER WOMEN

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The Impostor Phenomenon in Successful Career Women

Submitted by Madeline Hirschfeld, Ph.D.

Statement of the Problem

Many successful career women fail to reach their full career potential. One explanation for this may be the impostor phenomenon. The impostor phenomenon refers to the inability of some women to experience themselves as successful career persons; their fear that others will discover that they are impostors who are not as intelligent, skilled or capable as others believe them to be, and their uncertainty surrounding the means to maintain their success. Their belief that their success is tenuous, undeserved and fleeting limits career potential by lowering risk-taking, reducing productivity and lowering career aspirations (Clance & Imes, 1978).

The purpose of the present research was to investigate those antecedent variables which may be used to predict the impostor phenomenon in successful career women. The variables studied were self-perception, perception of parental career orientation, tolerance for ambiguity and attribution of causality in career success.

One factor which contributes to the impostor phenomenon is the conflict between nontraditional characteristics required in a career and traditional characteristics developed during earlier socialization. Those women who experience this conflict attempt to cope with it by denying or externalizing responsibility for their success and their accompanying nontraditional behaviors.

They are unable to discern a causal relationship between their abilities and traits and their success. The resulting anxiety which they experience is the impostor phenomenon. The degree of discrepancy between self-perception and perception of the traits and behaviors needed to function successfully in a career was expected to predict the impostor phenomenon.

Parents who accept and encourage their daughters to develop nontraditional feminine traits, behaviors and career goals raise daughters whose expectations of themselves include these characteristics (Almquist & Angrist, 1970; Trigg & Perlman, 1975). Also, such parents are more likely to provide their daughters with opportunities to identify and evaluate their skills and knowledge in nontraditionally feminine areas. Thus perception of parental career orientation was expected to be a predictor of the impostor phenomenon.

The nature of high status nontraditional careers and the overt and covert messages conveyed to women are often contradictory and ambiguous. In addition, traditionally socialized women frequently lack information regarding nontraditional careers. Hence, they suffer ambiguity pertaining to knowledge about their own career-related skills and others' career-related expectations. Therefore, since ambiguity obscures the causal relationship between women and their achievements, it was expected to be a predictor of the impostor phenomenon.

Successful career women experience difficulty in perceiving

themselves as successful, because in American Society women are generally not expected to achieve career success and women in general do not anticipate that they will be successful in their careers (Mayes, 1979). Yet when success is anticipated, it tends to be attributed to internal, stable and permanent factors (Deaux & Enswiller, 1974), and women are able to see cause-effect relationships between their behaviors and their achievements. It was hypothesized, therefore, that successful career women who were able to attribute the causes of their success to internal and permanent factors (i.e., ability) would suffer less from the effects of the impostor phenomenon.

Subjects

Eighty successful women functioning in traditionally masculine careers such as business, law and engineering comprised the sample. They ranged in age from 20 to 60 years and had a mean age of 35 years. Approximately 38% furthered their education beyond the bachelors degree with 36% holding doctoral degrees. They functioned in their present profession an average of seven years and earned an average salary of approximately \$38,000. annually.

Procedure

Subjects were informed that this study was an attempt to find practical methods of dealing with women in school and in business in order to enable them to better achieve their potential. Questionnaires were distributed by person and by

mail. All questionnaires were returned by mail unsigned to assure respondents' anonymity.

Each questionnaire contained five scales and demographic questions. The impostor phenomenon was measure by a modified form of Berger's (1952) Expressed Acceptance of Self Scale designed to tap self-acceptance in career contexts. Self-perception was measured by Factor One of the Jackson Personality Inventory (Jackson, 1976) administered twice to obtain a discrepancy score between self-perception and perception of the characteristics necessary to be successful in one's career. Perception of parental career orientation was measured by the Perception of Parental Career Orientation Scale which was developed by this researcher to measure retrospective perceptions of traditional versus nontraditional parental career orientations. Tolerance for ambiguity was measured by the Intolerance of Ambiguity Scale (Budner, 1962). The Career Success Attribution Measure was developed by this researcher to measure attribution of responsibility for career success to luck, ability or effort.

Results

Multiple regression analyses revealed that self-perception and perception of parental career orientation accounted for 32% and 11% of the variability in the impostor phenomenon ($p < .01$ and $p < .05$ respectively). Tolerance for ambiguity contributed less than 1%. Attribution of career success contributed 16% to the prediction of the impostor phenomenon ($p < .01$), but due to this

ipsative quality (i.e., rank order measure), it was not possible to assess the contribution of this variable when combined with the others.

Conclusions

The present study attempted to identify those factors which contribute to the impostor phenomenon. Discrepancies between self-perceptions and perceptions of the ideal person in one's field, retrospective perceptions of parental career orientation, and attribution of causality for career success contributed significantly to the prediction of the impostor phenomenon in successful career women. These findings suggest that successful career women who suffer from the impostor phenomenon have difficulty connecting various internal qualities to their achievements. As compared to nonimpostors, they are more likely to perceive themselves as not possessing the traits and behaviors needed for career success. They are also more likely to fail to attribute their career success primarily to ability. In addition, they do not perceive their parents as having socialized them to possess nontraditionally feminine traits and to pursue nontraditionally feminine careers. Thus it appears that impostors have not identified and internalized those parts of themselves that have been responsible for their career achievements. The cause-effect relationship between what they have done and their success remains unclear to them. Thus, to diminish the negative effects of the impostor phenomenon, it is necessary to

help women to recognize cause and effect relationships.

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